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ABSTRACT

High school educators can learn much from the middle school reform movement and apply its strategies to change interdisciplinary teaming and student advocacy programs. Many high schools today still operate with an outdated, impersonal, departmentalized, and factory-model approach to schooling, in which students do not develop a sense of belonging or allegiance. The middle school approach is centered around team teaching, which uses two or more teachers who share students, class periods, planning time during the school day, team development training, and commitment in working with the group of students they share. The benefits of such interdisciplinary learning teams include: (1) a more coherent and relevant curriculum; (2) higher order thinking skills; (3) improved attendance; (4) consistent messages and expectations for students; (5) reduced discipline problems; (6) early and cooperative intervention with at-risk students; (7) greater teacher motivation and satisfaction; (8) reduced failure rate; (9) improved social skills; (10) staff unity and reduced teacher isolation; (11) efficient and increased communication; (12) improved relations with community and local businesses; and (13) improved instruction. The growing movement for high school change suggests that hundreds of high schools around the nation will be using team teaching strategies by the end of the century. While high school interdisciplinary learning teams are not a panacea for the challenges facing high schools, they are a major tool that builds on the successes of middle school education. (Contains 25 references.) (MOK)

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# Turning the Tables:

# the Growing Need for High Schools

# to Follow the Lead of Middle Level Reform

# Thru Interdisciplinary Teaming

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The time has come to turn the tables on secondary school reform. Now that many of our nation's junior high schools have been successfully reformed into effective and affective middle level schools, high schools also need to become more effective and affective by connecting people and curricula. If high school educators can cast aside their collective egos, they can learn much from the middle school reform movement. Middle school change agents can teach their secondary school colleagues about the change process and the important reform components of interdisciplinary teaming and student advocacy programs. At a minimum, high school educators owe it to their students and middle level colleagues to continue the impressive gains made in many middle level schools.

Yet, when I have attended and presented at NMSA conferences over the past three years as a high school teacher, middle level educators only seem to tell me about indifference or opposition from their high schools for reforms they've undertaken. John Lounsbury, publications editor for the National Middle School Association, also has found high school educators resistant to change and he challenges them "to prove that this common perception held by middle level educators is unfounded" (1993).

In this article expressing solidarity with my middle school colleagues, I will attempt to prove that a growing number of high schools are changing, but that many more need to change by following the lead of the middle school movement.

## High school inertia and some seeds of change

It is unfortunately true that the vast majority of our high schools today are still operated with an outdated, impersonal,

departmentalized, factory-model approach to schooling (Cawelti, 1995; Lee & Smith 1994). Most high school students are just going through the motions and not learning much that they find meaningful or useful. Many just study for the test, and grades are only important to those students who are headed to college or those who can get a car insurance discount by having a certain grade-point average. Many students don't feel belonging or allegiance to their high school because they are essentially treated like numbers, or worse convicts, by the system. Many kids in high school don't see their presence as an opportunity to do anything other than socialize. It's scary and sad to think that many of the gains made with students in middle level education are being lost at the high school.

Thankfully, as some middle level educators and administrators move to positions at the high school level, they are bringing with them a new way of looking at the purpose and structure of schooling. For more than 35 years, middle level educators have recognized that the developmental needs of students are not best met with the factory model of operation in traditional high schools so they have increasingly changed their missions, structures, programs, and curricula for young adolescents. Some students and parents who come to "traditional" high schools from effective and affective middle level schools are also questioning the lack of coordination and cooperation among teachers isolated from each other by extreme departmentalization. Finally, there are high school educators like myself who simply developed common sense solutions to the problems in our own high schools, only to happily discover we were not alone in blazing a trail of secondary school reform.

Through my team teaching experiences, graduate studies in middle level education, networking with other change agents, and my observations over the past six years, I have regained hope and optimism by seeing how interdisciplinary learning teams can empower high school students, parents, counselors, teachers, and the curriculum to succeed in reaching their goals. What adds to my motivation is the fact that there is nothing new to this reform idea which I have come to embrace. An early pioneer in the middle school movement, Gordon Vars, has said that this is the third wave of reform with roots in the progressive education movement of the early 20th century. Dr. Vars once told me, "Good ideas don't die; they just come around again with a different twist."

## Definition and description of the learning team concept

I believe the term "learning team" is more descriptive, and sounds less like educational jargon or some corny fad to parents and the community when compared with more commonly used terms such as "team," "house," "cluster," "pod," "family," or "SWS (school-with-in-a-school)." Therefore, public relations in and out of school become easy and effective when everyone understands that *all* members on a team are learning first. Even though this concept is being implemented in many middle schools and in some high schools, the term "learning team" is not commonly used and, thus, requires definition and brief explanation. A learning team is simply . . .

- two (or more) teachers, from <u>any</u> two (or more) subjects, who share:
- common students;
- common class periods;

- common planning time during the school day;
- common team development training; and a
- common commitment in working with the group of students they share.

As is the case in middle schools, the primary purpose of any interdisciplinary learning team is to create small, cohesive communities of learning in which students and teachers make interpersonal and interdisciplinary connections. These connections are atypical under traditional high school scheduling structures which lead to isolation and alienation. With learning teams, the artificial confines of 45 minute periods can be replaced with blocks of time for students and teachers to engage in exploration and deep understanding. During these blocks of time, team teachers may or may not share the same room with all of their students. Ideally, learning teams empower teachers and students to create models of integrative learning whereby they collaboratively examine important topics, themes, or concepts based on student and societal concerns (Beane, 1993).

However, as the middle level reform movement is coming to realize more and more often, teaming at the high school level should be viewed as a means, not an end, in the school improvement process (Melton, 1995). Having stated this, it is useful to mention some positive outcomes of learning teams.

## Benefits of interdisciplinary learning teams

Research and reform literature over the past fifty years has shown that connecting people and the curriculum through teaming

energizes both students and teachers, and motivates both groups to excel (Hopkins, 1941; Aiken, 1942; Alberty, 1947; Lurry & Alberty, 1957; Erb and Doda, 1989; Jacobs, 1989; Merenbloom, 1991; Vars, 1991 & 1993; Lounsbury, 1992; Beane 1993, 1995; Lee & Smith 1994; Spies, 1994; Cawelti, 1995; Derrickson, 1995; LaPlante & Sample, 1995; Oeffling, 1995). In fact the National Association of Secondary School Principal's (NASSP) *High School Magazine* from December 1995 will be devoted to the whole topic of academic teaming.

Some of the many benefits that can result from interdisciplinary learning teams at high schools (and middle level schools) are the following:

- A more coherent and relevant curriculum.
- Use of higher order thinking skills.
- Increased opportunities for extended learning experiences beyond the typical class period.
- Improved attendance.
- Consistent messages and expectations for students.
- Reduced discipline problems.
- Early and cooperative intervention with at-risk students and those who may fall through the cracks unnoticed.
- Greater teacher motivation and satisfaction.
- Improved instruction.
- Reduced failure rate.
- Improved social skills through team emphasis and reinforcement.
- Staff unity with reduced teacher / department isolation.



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- Efficient and increased communication with resource personnel in the building (i.e. counselors, deans, special education staff, substance abuse staff) and parents.
- Improved relations with community and local businesses.

While high school learning teams should not be limited to certain "core" subjects or to certain groups and/or grades of students, learning teams are often easiest to schedule with required subjects, particularly during the first year of high school. It can also be argued that learning teams can be most beneficial when teaching freshmen because their affective needs are increased as a grade of students in transition between buildings, programs, expectations, and influences.

Ninth grade is a critical step for the student in taking a path toward earning a diploma or dropping out of school (Lounsbury & Johnston 1985). Some middle level education reform leaders such as Conrad Toepfer express concern about what happens to the early adolescent once they leave the environment of the student-centered middle school. Toepfer is especially concerned about "the need for high schools not to violate the integrity of the developmental readiness students possess when they matriculate in the high school" (Bergmann, 1994, pg 28).

High school transition programs including peer mentoring and campus visits can be much more possible and effective when middle school and high school learning team teachers cooperate. Instead of students leaving middle school as if they were products on an assembly line to be shipped to the next site, the students are

treated like the Olympic torch that is passed from one runner to the next with great pride, excitement, and care.

The emphasis I've placed here on making a smooth transition to high school for students should not be misinterpreted by my high school colleagues in some way as "babying" them and denying them the opportunity to "grow up." To the contrary, high school learning teams and student advisory programs across the country have promoted growth of the whole student and have helped students prepare for their challenging lives ahead.
In fact, as described in the too-often-overlooked Eight-Year Study, students who have attended progressive high schools have demonstrated similar or superior achievement at college relative to their peers from traditional high schools (Aiken, 1942).

## The wrong concern

A middle level director of curriculum recently asked me to respond to a concern from one of his school board members about the proposed plan to reform their traditional junior high school into a middle school with interdisciplinary teams. The board member's main concern was that this new reform plan will not make the students adequately prepared to succeed at their traditional high school.

As thousands of my middle level colleagues know, this school board member had the wrong concern, because traditionally structured high schools are not the model that best prepares adolescents for their future. Through my questioning of the curriculum director, I found out that there was no real transition program currently in place for students entering the high school.

One reason was that communication between the junior high and high school was minimal because they were in separate school districts. When I asked what kind of academic program was in place at the high school, the response I got was "pretty lack-luster."

What this discussion illustrates is something many middle level reform leaders clearly understand: The primary focus of middle level schools should not be preparation for high school, because most high school's are not the model of education to be striving toward. Middle schools must lead secondary education into the next millenium.

A growing movement for high school change

Yet, it's exciting to hear about more and more high schools across the country where traditionally isolated teachers experience the magic when they gain the opportunity and training to work together for the sake of students. As Paul George predicted in *The Middle School --and Beyond* , it seems that hundreds of high schools around the nation will be teaming by the turn of the century (1992). Whatever the varied causes or motivations behind these teaming efforts have been, many have occurred on their own without a coordinated effort on the part of districts, regions, or states. Thankfully this is changing with the help of the middle school movement.

For example, the Network for Secondary School Improvement was created in 1993 at NMSA's annual convention in Portland by like-minded high school reformers to bring coordination of the movement to a national level. In that same year, the California League of Middle Schools and the Association of Illinois Middle

Schools gave birth and support to new high school associations in their states, and these two high school associations joined forces in 1994 to create the National High School Association (NHSA). With it's national office in Irvine, California, NHSA has a stated goal of working closely with the national educational organizations like NMSA "to unite the restructuring efforts of America's high school educators in all fifty states" (*The National,* May 1995). You can contact NHSA at 1-800-858-9365. Furthermore, NASSP just started the National Alliance of High Schools to promote their recommendations in *Breaking Ranks.*

With the help of NHSA, NASSP and other organizations, high school educators and change agents will now have the opportunity to network via computer and in person at national and regional conferences so we can support each other and learn from each others' problems and achievements. Just as the middle school movement has mushroomed, so too needs the high school reform movement.

While high school interdisciplinary learning teams are not a panacea for the challenges facing high schools, they are a major tool for meaningful grass roots reform that builds upon the successes of middle level education.

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